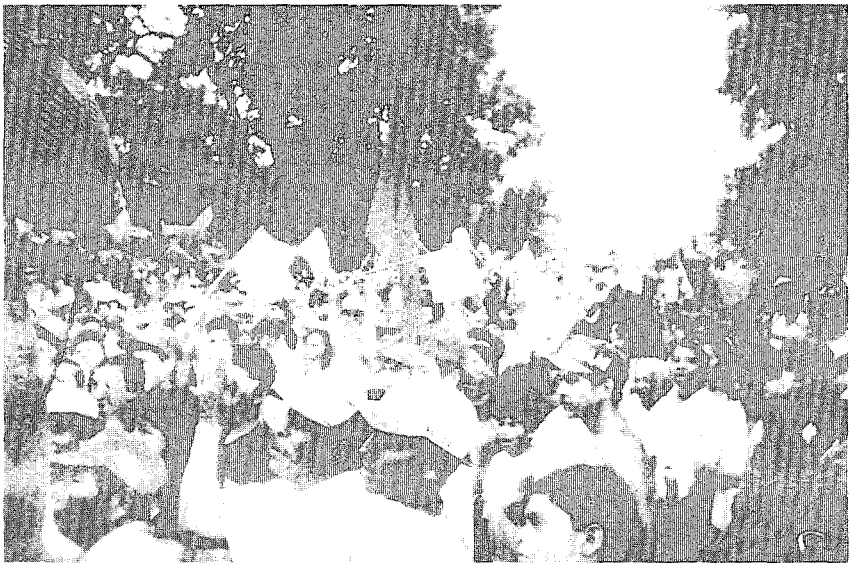
FROM BULLETS TO BALLOTS

NICARAGUA'S MEASURED MOVE TO DEMOCRACY

ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE TO POSTCONFLICT SOCIETIES



U.S. Agency for International Development • Center for Development Information and Evaluation

PN-ABY-249

Nicaragua's Measured Move to Democracy

Economic woes, a populace weary of war, and a changing world scene help bring free elections to this Central American republic. International aid smooths the process.

Decades Of Disaster

The political conflict that underlay the 1990 Nicaraguan elections was rooted in historical conditions of domestic tyranny and foreign interventions, most recently by the United States and the Soviet Union. The conflict involved both class struggle and resistance to autocratic rule. It was embedded in an ideological left-versus-right contest at the national and international levels that was characteristic of the Cold War.

Photograph of a rally in Nicaragua, courtesy of International Foundation for Election Systems.

Contents

Report written by Rafael López-Pintor, director of the Department of Sociology and Political Science, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid.

At the time of the conflict, Nicaraguan society was still recovering from the apocalyptic earthquake of December 1972, which destroyed the capital city of Managua. On top of that, the warfare that put an end to the dictatorship of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle cost an estimated $500 million, not to mention the loss of life and limb. The civil war of the 1980s generated an estimated 70,000 casualties and more than half a million exiles and displaced people. By the beginning of 1997, the economy had not yet recovered from these disasters.

Three main factors contributed to the end of the conflict. First, the international context changed drastically. Beginning in 1987, the leftist Sandinista government, which had replaced the Somoza regime, was bound by a number of international regional agreements calling for democratization and peace in Central America. There were also Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* (economic and bureaucratic restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), along with diminished economic support from the Soviet Union.

Second, the economy was in dismal condition. For one thing, public spending was largely being absorbed by a war in which the U.S. government clearly armed and trained the adversary. Even more damaging was the centralized control and regulation of the Nicaraguan economy.

Finally, the country was rife with discontent over economic hardships, military conscription, personal insecurity, and loss of life. These factors pushed the ruling leftist Sandinistas toward negotiations and spurred them to grant their opponents conditions of political pluralism and democratic elections.

In August 1987, in Esquipulas, Guatemala, the presidents of five Central American countries (Costa

Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) signed the Procedure for Establishing a Firm and Lasting Peace, a regional peace plan designed by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez. The plan (also known as Esquipulas II) led to negotiations between the Sandinista regime and the Nicaraguan Resistance (consisting of the three main counterrevolutionary, or Contra, groups). The two sides signed a cease-fire agreement in March 1988 at Sapoá, Nicaragua.

Esquipulas II also called for holding free and fair elections in the region. In February 1989, following a meeting at Tesoro Beach, in El Salvador, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega pledged to reform the electoral law and call for general elections. They were to be held in February 1990 and monitored by international observers. On the eve of a meeting in the small town of Tela, in Honduras, in August 1989, Ortega accepted opposition demands for electoral reform. Then the government accepted changes in election and media laws that improved the chances for democratic elections.

In March 1989, Nicaragua's foreign minister asked the UN secretary general for an observer mission to monitor the electoral process. The same month, President George Bush met with Jim Wright, speaker of the House of Representatives, and agreed to end U.S. assistance to the Contras. Secretary of State James Baker and the congressional leadership then sealed a bipartisan accord supporting the peace framework, denying military aid to the Contras, and calling for humanitarian assistance to the Nicaraguan Resistance through the February 1990 general elections.

The elections were called in an atmosphere of relative peace. Although demobilization and disarmament would not be complete until after the elections, the political and security situation was entirely different from that of the elections of 1984, held in the middle of the civil war.

Those elections were viewed by international observers as politically flawed. The main opposition parties withdrew from the race, alleging an absence of conditions for free competition. The experience may have taught the government to have a more open and conciliatory outlook in 1990. It may also have helped opposition parties develop a more pragmatic approach in negotiating changes in electoral legislation.

International Assistance

From the standpoint of international political and technical assistance, the elections were a historic landmark. They marked the first time that international electoral assistance was given to a sovereign nation in a very significant amount. Responsible for this assistance were the U.S. government, the "Friendly Countries Club" (Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Spain), the Jimmy Carter Council of Freely Elected Heads of State, the United Nations, and the Organization of American States (OAS). Some of these missions visited Nicaragua in March 1989 (shortly after the government accepted the ground rules for the elections) and helped draft specific recommendations for reform.

The presidents of five Central American countries signed a regional peace plan designed by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez.

A UN technical assistance mission visited the country in April and May 1989. The subsequent report was taken into account to establish an observer mission in July. Similarly, the OAS looked for financial support from the governments of the United States, Spain, France, and Sweden to establish its own observer mission. A third mission dealing exclusively with political aspects was led by former president Jimmy Carter.

The international missions made an important contribution to the conduct of these elections.

The Sapoá accords and the cease-fire of 1988 prompted a flow of humanitarian assistance from both the United States and different UN agencies. The aid had considerable effect in creating an atmosphere of confidence in a more peaceful future for which the elections may have been viewed as a positive step. Among the assistance was $10 million for support of a Verification Commission, called for in the Sapoá accords. The money was part of a 1988 USAID $47.9 million package of humanitarian assistance to the Nicaraguan Resistance. The most important assistance package, though, was a $12 million congressional appropriation for a variety of programs supporting democratic elections (see table 1).

The importance of U.S. electoral assistance may be summarily assessed by stating that no relevant sector of Nicaraguan society was left without a share in this fund. Beneficiaries included the electoral authority and all parties of the opposition, democratic civic groups, trade unions, and independent media. Furthermore, two of the three main observer missions (OAS and Carter) and some of the minor ones (Freedom House, the Costa Rica–based Center for Electoral Assistance and Promotion) were basically financed by direct U.S. aid. By all accounts, the international missions made an important contribution to the conduct of these elections. The missions cooperated with one another, and labor was divided functionally among them: Carter dealt with conflict resolution at high levels, the UN observer mission was more closely attached to the workings of a government body called the Supreme Electoral Council, and OAS operated at the regional level.

Elections

On 25 February 1990, Nicaraguan voters cast three different ballots. First, they voted for president and vice president, the winners being elected by simple majority in a single round with the nation as a single district. Second, they voted for a 90-seat National Assembly, elected by proportional representation from party lists with the nine regions as electoral districts and a number of seats awarded according to population. And third, they voted for 131 mayors and municipal councils, from party lists and a mixed majority–proportional representation formula. (The party obtaining a simple majority of the vote won 50 percent of the council seats, the other 50 percent being distributed according to a proportional rule among all parties, including the one that got the largest plurality. The mayors were elected by simple majority of the council members).

In 1990, no municipal councils were elected in the two regions of the Atlantic coast; instead, two regional autonomous councils, with 45 seats each, were elected by proportional representation. All elections were for six-year terms.

The reformed constitution of 1995 and the new electoral statute of 1996 have introduced substantial changes in the electoral formulas for the different elections and the electoral institutions. The president and vice president are now elected on a second round if no candidate receives at least 45 percent of the votes in a first round. The Assembly's 90 seats are split into two tiers: 70 seats are filled by proportional representation in 17 electoral districts (the 15 new departments and two Atlantic regions), and the other 20 are filled by proportional representation from national party lists.

The nine former regions are now obsolete. The new legislation divides the country into five electoral districts, but only for the purpose of calculating average electoral quotients for assigning additional seats in the Assembly to losing presidential candidates who have obtained a certain number of votes. The five districts also serve for allocating the distribution of the 20 remaining Assembly seats. Mayors are now elected by direct popular vote and simple majority, but municipal council members continue to be elected by proportional representation. The president and the Assembly are elected for five years; mayors and municipal councils, for four.

Minimum voting age in Nicaragua is 16. To be eligible for president a citizen must at least be 25; for the Assembly and the municipal councils, 21.

Following Latin American tradition, the electoral authority in Nicaragua is established as a fourth branch of government. First, there is a five-member Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) elected by the National Assembly from a list submitted by the president. For the 1990 elections the CSE had two members from the opposition parties and a neutral member selected as president. Once in office, the CSE, in turn, appointed nine three-person regional electoral councils responsible for establishing 4,394 local polling stations.

Conduct Of Elections

As a first step, voter registration took place during each of the four Sundays of October 1989. It was based at the local polling stations where the actual balloting would occur. The registration operation was the responsibility of the Supreme Electoral Council, which was assisted by the computing departments of the

Table 1. U.S. Funds Granted to the Nicaraguan Electoral Process

National Endowment for Democracy	$7,685,000
Unión Nacional Opositora	1,800,000
Supreme Electoral Council	1,800,000
Institute for Electoral Promotion and Training	1,500,000
Vía Cívica	220,000
Nicaraguan Labor Federation	493,000
Activities consistent with legislation	970,000
Management, oversight	897,000
Organization of American States	3,000,000
President Carter's Council of Freely Elected Heads of State	400,000
Interamerican Institute for Human Rights/CAPEL	400,000
Center for Democracy	250,000
Office of the inspector general and one election expert	180,000
Freedom House	82,000
Total	$11,827,000

Source: USAID

Following Latin American tradition, the electoral authority in Nicaragua is established as a fourth branch of government.

National Technological University and the Institute of Land Survey. During this period, 1,750,000 voters (or 89 percent of the population eligible to vote) were registered at 4,391 centers. Since no population census had been carried out after 1973, the CSE conducted a sample survey of population aged 16 and over. The council determined the number of potential voters at 1,970,486.

Military personnel registered in the centers closest to their garrison. It was necessary for the military (as for the rest of voters) to cast their ballots in the same center where they had registered, unless otherwise authorized by the CSE. Nicaraguans living abroad could register and vote once in-country, but they could not register abroad nor cast absentee ballots. Another special case was that of the Atlantic coast, where, owing to high outmigration and inadequate communication links, many people could not register in October. The CSE accepted the demand of area citizens and allowed for a single later registration day, 6 February 1990.

As the campaign commenced, three issues became paramount. First was media access to all contending parties, a major concern since the announcement of the elections. Except for television, the basic demands of the opposition were met. Both public and private radio stations as well as the print press provided an opportunity for all contenders to defend their views.

Funding was the second tough issue. It remained unresolved until the last phase of the campaign. A small state fund existed to finance the political parties. Money from it would be distributed according to the parties' share of the vote in the 1984 elections and in equal shares to all parties that registered for the 1990 elections. Local private financing of the parties was never disclosed, but it was clear that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) enjoyed the use of state resources, whereas the opposition had nothing similar.

On foreign financing, the law did not set a limit. It did establish, though, that it should be delivered through the CSE and that any donation exceeding $20,000 should be split, with 50 percent going to the CSE Fund for Democracy (for election expenses) and the other 50 percent to the recipient. The largest foreign donations were a USAID grant for the Opposition National Union (UNO) ($1.8 million) and the Institute for Electoral Promotion and Training ($1.5 million). (The UNO is a broad-based coalition of 14 parties, united only in their opposition to the Sandinistas.) The institute is not a political party (it is a Nicaraguan nongovernmental organization) and therefore was not required to split the grant. In addition to some bureaucratic problems in Washington, the Nicaraguan central bank delayed delivery of this grant. It was only after Jimmy Carter interceded that the government eased disbursement. Still, most of the money became available only when the campaign was virtually over.

A total of $7.1 million in foreign donations was reported by all parties (with only three out of the 10 on the ballot reporting): $3.7 million by UNO, $3.4 million by the FSLN, and only $2,500 by the Social Christian Party, a center-to-right bloc. The

largest component of UNO's fund came from the USAID grant. The largest component of the FSLN fund was material contributions, mainly campaign paraphernalia, from Spain, Colombia, and Mexico. Only $400,000 was in the form of cash to be split with the CSE. Outside contributions notwithstanding, money available to the opposition parties paled in comparison with the huge amount of resources available to the government and the FSLN.

In general terms, the campaign was conducted with little violence and intimidation, but it was not exempt from them either. In November and December, violence frequently broke out at the first rallies. In an incident in December 1989 in the town of Masatepe, near Managua, one person was killed. That prompted the CSE as well as the contending parties and the UN and OAS observer missions to seek interparty accords on codes of conduct.

Public gatherings and demonstrations were closely monitored by UN and OAS observers. UN observers reported having attended almost 80 percent of the public activities of opposition parties in all regions and a smaller number of events of the FSLN. They received hundreds of complaints and conducted investigations in at least 200 cases. They also monitored almost the totality of radio and television political programs. A number of cases of intimidation, a majority against opposition political parties, were reported to the observer missions. About 200 candidates, most of them municipal, withdrew; of these, approximately 140 belonged to UNO.

From October 1989 to February 1990, and despite the cease-fire, continuing irregular military clashes between the government and the Contras in the central regions of the country caused at least 67 civilian deaths. The UN observer mission considered this a serious problem, particularly when the large number of deaths was compared with the small number of people killed or wounded in incidents more directly related to electoral activity.

International observation was important, even decisive, but still more important may be the fact that both the FSLN and the opposition UNO had poll-watchers in practically every voting site in the country. An exhaustive list of international observers—2,578 of them—was printed in the fifth report of the UN observer mission.

The observers were classified by organization as follows: OAS (418), the UN observer mission (237), Carter's Council of Heads of State (78), European organizations (360), North American organizations (696), Sister Cities Program (357), Latin American organizations (413), Asian organizations (7), African organizations (6), Australian organizations (6).

Not all were granted the same observer status by CSE. Only UN and OAS (655) were formally categorized as "international observers," with a capacity to handle claims and complaints. The other two categories were "invited observers" (779) and "courtesy passes" (1,144). The latter could only watch at the polling stations.

The largest foreign donations were a USAID grant for the Opposition National Union (UNO) ($1.8 million) and the Institute for Electoral Promotion and Training ($1.5 million).

Election Outcome

On election day, 1,510,838 out of a total of 1,752,088 registered voters, or 85 percent of the electorate, cast their ballots. Some 70,000 clerks, police, and other electoral officials worked in the elections.

On election day, 85 percent of the electorate cast their ballots.

Given the considerable distrust between government and opposition, the presence of poll-watchers was crucial to ensure that the results were accepted and viewed as legitimate, no matter the winner. Some 33,000 poll-watchers were accredited for the different political parties, slightly more than half of whom were from the opposition. A provisional count was carried out by ballot-receiving committees on the evening of election day. The results were flashed by telex to the national center set up in the Convention Center in Managua. The official count was conducted the following days by the regional electoral councils and the results sent to the Supreme Electoral Council.

In the presidential election, the candidate of the opposition UNO, Violeta Chamorro, gained the presidency with 54.7 percent of the vote. Daniel Ortega of the governing FSLN got 40.8 percent. Of the remaining candidates, only the candidate of the Revolutionary Unity Movement, (a breakaway faction of the FSLN) obtained more than 1 percent. That allowed him to win a seat in the Assembly. Seven other candidates got less than 1 percent each.

In the election for the National Assembly, the UNO obtained 51 out of 91 seats, 39 seats went to the FSLN, 1 to the Social Christian Party–Yatama, and 1 was added for the presidential candidate with more than 1 percent of the vote. (Yatama is the name of the armed organization of the Miskito Indians; it became a political party on the eve of the elections.)

In the municipal council elections, UNO won a majority, enabling it to appoint mayors in 99 of the 131 towns in which elections were held. This included most of the main cities in the country, including Managua. The FSLN won a majority in 32 municipalities, including León and Estelí. In the elections for the Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic, the local party Yatama won 22 seats, FSLN 21, and UNO 2. In the council elections of the South Atlantic region, UNO won 22 seats and FSLN won 18; 5 seats went to Yatama and the multiethnic Youth Movement.

The results were announced promptly. A first announcement was made by the CSE soon after midnight on election day, when 5 percent of the ballot had been counted. This was followed by a second and third announcement in the following hours. The results of the final official ballot count were available between March 1 and 4, depending on the region.

The UN mission made a projection of the results through a parallel count on a statistical sample of 11 percent of the polling stations. Between 7:45 p.m. and 9 p.m. the results of the presidential elections were known with a margin of error smaller than 1 percent. Elliot Richardson, head of the UN mission, passed the information on to the CSE, to Jimmy Carter, and to the secretary general of the OAS. It was this information that

Carter delivered to President Ortega by midnight, to forewarn him of the Sandinista defeat.

The unanimous verdict of international observers was that the elections had been conducted in a free and fair manner and that they should be considered genuinely democratic.

Consequences

International assistance affected the conduct of the elections in helping free and fair competition for power. We will now try to explain the ways in which the elections themselves affected the prospects for democracy and governance in the different institutions of the political system.

International assistance for democracy-building activities in the postelectoral period was primarily given by USAID after what was considered a successful experience in assisting the conduct of elections. This suggests that effective assistance tends to bring about further assistance. Few of the many donors in Nicaragua at the time were involved in furthering democracy. Main reference is therefore to the approval in July 1991 of a USAID grant for $14 million to cover a number of democracy-related projects through June 1995 (see table 3).

Executive Branch

In a country without a democratic tradition, such as Nicaragua, the conduct of an election by genuine democratic standards, as well as the acceptance of defeat by the party in power, must be considered as having a significant legitimizing effect on all public institutions, but particularly the executive. This is all the more so if the single-party thrust of the Sandinista government is taken into account.

The prospects for stability for the Chamorro government would depend largely on three factors: 1) reversing Sandinista economic policies, 2) demobilizing and disarming the Contras, and 3) reducing the size of the army and keeping it within its garrisons. All these factors were included in the Sapoá accords and would constitute the subject of the transitional agreement between FSLN and UNO.

Representative Bodies

The main effect of the elections on the National Assembly was to make it more plural by allowing most contending forces to have representatives in it. The new UNO majority included candidates from 11 different parties. Unlike the 1984 elections, all main contenders were now sitting in the legislature.

On the Sandinista side, the FSLN soon formed a parliamentary group (Center Group) with various center-leaning parties, some of which had obtained representation in the 1984 Assembly. But by the legislature's midterm the FSLN would split between its social democratic and more radical leftist factions.

On the UNO side, the president's chief of staff and son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, led the moderate wing; Arnoldo Alemán led the more technocratic faction; and Vice President

The unanimous verdict of international observers was that the elections had been conducted in a free and fair manner and that they should be considered genuinely democratic.

Virgilio Godoy the more conservative and intransigent segment. Recurrent confrontations between factions supporting the government and the FSLN, as well as within each of those sectors, led the Assembly to complete paralysis by midterm.

Nevertheless, by 1995, legislative activity was relatively normal, though slow, after an institutional crisis lasting longer than one year ended and an agreement was reached for the reform of the 1987 constitution. A number of important reforms were actually approved as 65 out of the 202 articles of the original constitution were modified.

Electoral Authorities And Future Elections

The electoral authority of Nicaragua was left in good shape after the February elections. Even before an election was announced, the Supreme Electoral Council had already built some institutional capacity after the experience with the 1984 election. In 1984 a stream of substantial international assistance came to consolidate the institutional structures of the CSE at the national and local levels. As a consequence, the CSE remained a well-built institution of government. The flow of financial and technical international support to the CSE did not stop after the 1990 elections. Some assistance programs sponsored by foreign governments continued, especially those of European nations such as Sweden and Spain. Proof of the CSE's institutional strength was that it remained intact for 1996.

More than a third of international electoral assistance (of about $20 million) was devoted to *cedulación*—that is, to the issuing of a single national identity card as the basis for a voter registry (see table 2). The rest was earmarked for the 1996 election.

A significant continuing effort has been made to improve the organization of a permanent registry of voters. At the time of the 1990 elections, authorities and donors were discussing the possibility of establishing a permanent registry of voters based on a new civil registry and a single national identification document. The voter registry elaborated for the 1996 elections, established by the new electoral statute, is a permanent registry based on *cédulas de identidad,* which citizens use for identification before voting. It was anticipated that by the time of the 1996 elections, about two thirds of the country would be included in the new registry and that voters would use their single national identification document without having to register anew. It is mostly in rural areas that the organization of the new registry has not yet been completed.

Table 3. Categories of the July 1991 USAID Electoral Grant

Media	$685,000[a]
American Institute for Free Labor Development	2,840,000
Political parties	650,000
Governmental institutions	2,130,000
Human rights support	1,550,000
Civic education	3,620,000
Contingency	1,400,000
Project support, audit, evaluation	1125,000
Total	$14,000,000

[a]Totals shown are money allocated, but not necessarily spent, in the Strengthening Democratic Initiatives project.

Source: USAID 1996

Local Authorities

At a political institutional level, the first effect of the municipal elections was to bring new blood to local government. For the first time in Nicaraguan history, a variety of political forces obtained representation in municipal councils. The second effect was to enhance opportunities for administrative and financial autonomy from the central government. Also at a local (though nonmunicipal) level, the elections brought a better arrangement for the ethnic minorities of the Atlantic coast through popularly elected regional councils. (According to the law, municipal elections in the region were due in 1994. They were carried out on schedule, and the Sandinistas came close to winning.)

Judiciary

The judicial branch was in much need of reform and assistance. Changes started soon after the new government's inauguration.

The bulk of international assistance in support of the administration of justice, still more than in other fields of the democracy sector, came from USAID. First, and within the scope of the 1991 grant, $200,000 was allocated for a study of judicial reform. Later, in February 1994, an amendment to the Agency's Strengthening Democratic Initiatives project granted $4 million to the administration of justice for technical assistance, training, and limited commodity support to the courts and office of the attorney general (public defender's office). This money did not begin to flow, however, until late 1996.

Two constitutional reforms have strengthened human rights institutions and the judiciary in particular. First, a human rights procurator office was established as an independent institution. (Though, to date, an ombudsman has not been named.) The procurator and a deputy are elected by the National Assembly. Second, it was established that the judiciary be provided with at least 4 percent of the total national budget.

Civic Organizations

The network of voluntary associations of civil society was thin on the eve of the 1994 elections. The electoral experience allowed some improvement. International assistance given to some established organizations (as well as to some new ones) allowed them to carry out civic education and electoral mobilization activities. Such was the case with labor, business, and human rights groups and with some civic education organizations.

By 1995, legislative activity was relatively normal, though slow.

Postelectoral assistance was aimed at building on previous experience and helping consolidate some of those organizations. Assistance to civic organizations was intended to strengthen the capacities for citizen participation as well as to improve the protection of human rights.

Demobilization And Resettlement

Demobilizing the resistance and reducing the Sandinista army were major problems. The election outcome had a significant effect on both situations but insufficiently so to resolve them completely. On the one hand a genuine democratic election

had been held with participation of all opposition parties, all returning to civilian politics and thereby ratifying the end of war. On the other hand, the election was won by the opposition, and the Sandinistas accepted their defeat. That favored prospects for reintegration of the Nicaraguan resistance, which had been distrustful of a fair electoral result. Although changes described below were not exclusively due to the outcome of the election, they would not have taken place without it.

According to governmental and military sources, from 1990 through 1993 the size of the army was reduced from 80,000 to some 16,000, rapidly becoming the smallest army in Central America. The number of officers dropped from 15,000 to 2,000. Conscripts were released from their two-year commitments with no benefits whatsoever. For their part, government critics did not seem much impressed by these figures. They alleged that the end of the war made the reduction inevitable and also that desertions accounted for a large part of the decrease.

A related institutional change contained in the amended 1995 constitution is the one relating to the armed forces. The former Sandinista Popular Army has been renamed simply the Nicaraguan Army. Conscription has been abolished. The jurisdictional autonomy of the army is severely curtailed. One provision, for example, prohibits bringing civilians before military tribunals. Another prescribes that military personnel shall always be tried by civilian courts if the crimes alleged against them are not of a military nature.

Despite the name change, however, there has been little improvement. True enough, the former head of the armed forces, Umberto Ortega (Daniel's brother), was finally forced to step down. But the army is still predominantly Sandinista. The real changes have been in gradual attempts to bring civilian control over the military.

Table 2. Funds Actually Disbursed to the Supreme Electoral Council, 1990–96

Donor Country	*US$ millions*
United States	4.5
Spain	2.8
Sweden	2.8
Denmark	2.1
Switzerland	1.6
Holland	1.4
Norway	1.3
Japan	0.5
Finland	0.1
Other (Canada, OAS–International Support and Verification Commission)	0.08
Total	17.18

Source: CSE for all donors except USAID.

Repatriation of Refugees and Return of Internally Displaced Persons

From 1986 through 1993, repatriated Nicaraguan refugees numbered 71,750. Most were poor peasants or farm workers returning from camps or settlements of the UN High Commission on Refugees in Honduras or Costa Rica. Those assisted by the UNHCR were provided transport

back to their places of origin, given $50, a six-month supply of foodstuffs, rudimentary housing, and some agricultural tools. A fourth of them returned on their own, without any assistance.

Other than refugees, the number of people who had been internally displaced by the war came to 354,000. Most of them had lived in government-supported rural settlements for several years. Their situation was therefore more stable than that of other displaced persons. Still, they were to suffer from the lack of resources available from the government as well as the inexperience of those dealing with the displaced.

Ethnic, Religious, And Regional Cleavages

A significant and historically rooted rift in Nicaragua relates to the ethnic minorities of the northern and southern regions of the Atlantic coast, especially Miskito Indians. In an effort to pacify these areas, the Sandinista government granted its citizens a measure of autonomy by establishing two regional councils and calling for an election for the councils jointly with the general election. An interest in politically accommodating these minorities can be deduced from the electoral formula that was chosen for the council elections, giving ample margin for minority representation.

Taking the two regions together, a number of representatives were being elected at large from among the total number for the National Assembly—90 in all. Moreover, to guarantee some measure of ethnic minority representation and on the basis of the ethnic composition of certain districts, the law established that in a number of districts the first candidate in every party list must come from a given minority group.

Conclusions And Lessons

Timing of elections. At the very least, an effective cease-fire is necessary for a democratic election. A political will to demobilize and disarm by former combatants as well as by the international powers assisting them in the peace process is also necessary. Even if demobilization dates were not met as originally negotiated, none of the parties rejected the accord, and all ran with the expectation of winning and of putting an end to the war.

Demobilizing the resistance and reducing the Sandinista army were major problems.

Security issues. Much depends on the extent to which combatants have actually stopped fighting, disarmed, and been demobilized. For a free and fair election to take place, access to all areas of the territory should be physically possible. In Nicaragua, only some small portions of the northern regions and a part of the Miskito land were unsafe at election time. Contending parties did not make a special issue of this matter and conducted their campaigning under normal conditions of access to every portion of the country.

That citizens were able to exercise their political rights owed little to government control over its security apparatus, even less to any tradition of human rights protection in Nicaragua. (Assessment of the police and

judicial tradition has been negative.) It was the high degree of party pluralism and of citizens' political mobilization that counteracted the predominant position of the Sandinista government and the FSLN. Most of this was achieved through political information and mobilization and training of activists from parties, unions, and other organizations supported by international electoral assistance.

The law established that in a number of districts the first candidate in every party list must come from a given minority group.

A lesson to be learned by donors is this: the breakdown of barriers to the exercise of political freedom can be achieved with limited resources, in any case fewer than those available to the political establishment. If such were not the case, no establishment as solid as that of the FSLN in 1990 could ever be de-established.

Electoral innovation. Withdrawal of the main opposition parties from the 1984 elections led to changes in the conduct of the 1990 elections. The government adopted a more open and conciliatory outlook in 1990. And opposition parties developed a more pragmatic approach in negotiating changes in electoral legislation. Thus, the political apparatus can learn from past negative experiences.

Important changes were introduced in the electoral legislation as a direct consequence of the 1988 Sapoá agreements. A new electoral law was issued later in 1988. It regulated all types of elections and provided for a more balanced composition of the electoral authority and the possibility for autonomous regional government and representation of ethnic minorities in the strife-torn Atlantic region.

The Supreme Electoral Council was integrated on a multiparty basis. It acted with high standards of neutrality and technical competence. That style of management at the central level pervaded all levels of the system. The lesson here is that an electoral authority can be party based and still operate neutrally and independently. When there is no better tradition or an existing body of widely respected independent civil servants, it is the multiparty composition of the electoral authority that may better guarantee a balanced action.

There were no arguments regarding the vote-counting procedure. The overall conduct of the counting and the proclaiming of the results must be considered exceptionally fair and effective. This uneventfulness is rarely the case in postconflict elections. The way the votes were counted might be a model for other countries facing transitional elections.

The main international observer missions in Nicaragua, those of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, had been operating long term in every region of the country. This intensive and extensive observation seems to be more effective and cost-efficient than short-term observation with large numbers of participants.

Constitutional models. The Nicaraguan experience, in conjunction with other cases, shows that there is no one best electoral formula for democracy. The best formula is always "the best under the circumstances," which has to do with political tradition and capacity to accommodate existing political rifts. Tradition is a given to be tackled by those assisting in an electoral process. As for accommodating political differences, not all electoral formulas are equally suited,

in a given society. In Nicaragua, the main institutional arrangement came from the Latin American tradition of constitutionalism, presidential politics, and proportional representation—but adjusted to new demands coming from the warring factions.

Democracy-promoting activities. Development of a citizen mentality imbued with the democratic values of a civic culture is a long-term endeavor requiring the support of the international community. Although the effects of this kind of support may not be highly visible in the short term, they should be given attention. Civic education activities have short-term synergistic effects on other democracy-promoting activities such as those dealing with the promotion of civic associations and human rights monitoring groups. Assistance for development of the mass media is often required for enhancing pluralism and improving the levels of professionalism and objective reporting.

Donor coordination. In general terms, coordination is a good investment for international assistance. It saves time, money, and physical efforts as much as it allows for information exchanges, which at times have turned out invaluable.

When there is a main donor (such as the U.S. government or the European Community), some basic coordination among different programs will come "structurally imposed" by that important funding source.

When there is not a main donor but a number of limited contributors, as has been the case in a number of countries, a common coordinator should be looked for. Preferably it should be an agency such as the UN Development Program. As a last instance, it might be the supreme electoral authority. Such a coordinator should be considered the last resort, however, because it invites politicization and injection of local interests.

The breakdown of barriers to the exercise of political freedom can be achieved with limited resources.